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SPECIAL ANALYSES

POLAND: The New Trade Unions

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The agreement granting free trade unions to Polish workers has many details yet to be worked out that will determine how influential these unions will be. The Polish regime clearly will use future negotiations to subvert or restrict the unions' freedom but probably is reconciled to allowing them some latitude.

The regime has agreed to "guarantee and ensure full respect" for the new free trade unions and promised that the unions would have "full opportunities" to defend the material, social, and cultural needs of the workers. The regime also agreed to allow the unions to express their views on national economic priorities, using their own research bureau and publications, but left unclear how such advice would affect economic planning in Warsaw.

The workers agreed to adhere to Poland's constitution that refers to Poland as a socialist state, to recognize the leading role of the Communist Party and to refrain from acting as a political party, to take a firm stand on public ownership of the means of production, and promised not to question Poland's international alliances.

These provisions do not yet carry the force of law. The regime has obligated itself to draft a new law on trade unions and has guaranteed that the new unions will be able to participate in its preparation. Unlike the other provisions in the agreement, however, no time limit was set for completing this draft. The negotiations on the law will provide the regime with the opportunity to try to define as narrowly as possible the role and functions of the new unions and will probably result in protracted and heated arguments.

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The key to whether the new unions will emerge as a genuine and effective force in representing worker interest lies in whether they gain the right to negotiate wage agreements, with the right to strike to support their demands. Winning the right to bargain wage agreements would spell the end of central planning as now practiced in Poland.

The strikers in Gdansk were the first to make the issue of free trade unions a key demand, despite the fact that unhappiness with the official trade unions had appeared almost from the beginning of the strikes in early July. Although these earlier strikers had been content with promises of union reform, the strikers in Gdansk were more tenacious for several reasons. The Gdansk shipyards had been at the center of the 1970 riots and disturbances, and the memories of the bloodshed then and the failure of the regime to carry out its promises of union reform were poignant and close to the surface. In addition, the strikes were led by individuals who had participated in the 1970 events and who had vowed never again to be taken in by government blandishments. The strikers felt they could not trust the regime and wanted an organization of their own to defend their interests.

The strikers in Gdansk succeeded because, in addition to having good leaders, they:

- Maintained discipline and unity and avoided violence.
- Faced a weakened regime that had early signaled its inability or unwillingness to use force and that had used up its few other options.
- Received support from workers all over the country, many of whom conducted sympathy strikes.
- Received political advice and support from intellectual dissidents.
- Gained a great deal of publicity in the Western media, publicity that put additional pressure on the regime to end the dispute as quickly as possible.

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The free trade union movement will enjoy a great deal of initial support and popularity. Distrust for the regime is widespread among all strata of society, and the formation of new unions promises a method of demonstrating this. It will be several months, however, before we will be able to tell how this enthusiasm is translated into action.

Workers outside the Baltic coast may not have the tenacity it takes to counteract the numerous roadblocks the regime can be expected to put in the way of free trade unions. The reform of the official trade unions, which the regime will probably try to rush through, could also drain some support for the free unions. The workers themselves--previously united only by the shared goal of wresting some power from the authorities--may now put forward differing views over how the unions are to be organized and what functions they are to perform.

The regime may not feel much pressure on economic issues from the free trade unions in the immediate future. Union organizers will be preoccupied with legal and other intricacies of setting up their organizations, particularly the negotiation of the new law on trade unions. After this temporary lull, however, the unions seem destined to start putting increasingly greater pressure on the regime, certainly by the end of the year.

One immediate consequence of the formation of the new unions may be an increase in worker morale and productivity. In the longer run, however, this will not result in greater productivity. The agreements thus far signed apparently undermine the flexibility--on price increases, for example--that the Polish economy requires for more efficient allocation of resources.

The political victory that formation of independent trade unions represents also is not likely to be followed by the increases in real income which the workers evidently expect. Disappointment over unrealized improvements in the standard of living could trigger new civil disturbances.

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In trying to subvert the concept of free trade unions, the regime may feel that the best it can hope for is to restrict them to influencing local economic issues. The party also may hope that it can use the unions as a means of engaging workers in the country's difficult economic problems and of convincing them to work harder. The party may be encouraged in this hope by the fact that the strikers agreed to delay implementation of economic concessions and promised to work extra hours to make up for lost production.

The government's most important goals, however, are to limit the damage to its authority by:

- Not letting the unions act as a guarantor of political liberalization. The government starts from a weak position, however, because its agreement with union organizers implicitly concedes them such a broader political role.
- Excluding the unions from being involved in the politically sensitive issue of setting national economic priorities. In order to confine union-management conflict to the local level, the regime may be prepared to grant local authorities more responsibility in setting wages and dispensing other economic benefits.
- Preventing formation of a national federation of free trade unions. The regime obviously will be in a stronger position if it can deal with a large number of small unions.
- Denying them funding from the West. The new unions' greatest vulnerability is lack of money. Local leaders in Gdansk have initially agreed to allow the union to receive foreign funds. We would expect this decision to be reversed.

The party will try to undermine the influence and attractiveness of the free trade unions by moving rapidly to make officially sponsored trade unions more responsive

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to worker demands. It will have some time to act because the free unions will not be able to establish themselves quickly. The party has already promised free union elections wherever workers demand them and will probably be willing to let potential free union organizers run in such elections. The regime undoubtedly will also put more economic benefits at the disposal of its unions to entice workers to its side. It will need economic aid to compete with the free trade unions, but the Soviets might consider this a small price to pay.

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